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SIPDIS

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [ECON](#) [EFIN](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: PUTIN'S ASIAN MEDIA LEITMOTIF: I'M IN CHARGE

Classified By: CDA Eric Rubin; reasons 1.4(b/d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Prime Minister Putin's interview with Japanese media and his briefer exchanges with reporters while in Japan and Mongolia have given pundits a wealth of information to analyze for signs of splits within the ruling "tandemocracy," as well as for indications of Putin's predilections for reclaiming the presidency. Though being downplayed by United Russia and in news sources favorable to the government, remarks regarding positions Putin and Medvedev may occupy in the future have fueled speculation that Putin may be eyeing a return to the Kremlin in 2012. Putin has, true to form, kept the political system off-balance, reasserting himself as its pivotal decision-maker. End Summary.

Functioning of the Tandem

¶2. (SBU) In an interview with Japanese reporters (published in Moscow May 10, the day after Medvedev occupied center stage at Victory Day celebrations), Prime Minister Putin answered a wide range of questions covering political and commercial ties with Japan, but also relations with the U.S. While these subjects have received some attention in Russia, it is Putin's characterization of his relationship with Medvedev and possible hints as to his intentions for the 2012 presidential race that have provided the fodder for political observers' commentaries and debates. Putin lauded his close working ties with Medvedev, as well as Medvedev's personal commitment to the well-being of the country. However, in amplifying on the latter point, Putin claimed that the financial crisis was testing the abilities of leaders worldwide. Thus, at an appropriate time before the elections he and Medvedev would discuss who would be best suited to advance Russian interests and serve as president. Putin reiterated his respect for Medvedev's personal integrity and said he was therefore confident Medvedev would objectively put the interests of the country and the "results of our joint efforts" ahead of his personal desires.

¶3. (C) While tandem speculation in Putin's interview has not been emphasized by the governing United Russia party, either via its website and through its various mouthpieces, including Rossiskaya Gazeta, liberal pundits have blasted the Prime Minister, arguing that he has in effect undercut the President. New Times editor Yevgeniya Albats (an inveterate Putin critic and Medvedev skeptic) was scathing in her assessment. She had told us May 6 that she was unimpressed by recent "liberal" Medvedev moves - his interview with "Novaya Gazeta" and his meeting with his Council on Civil Society, preferring to wait for action, not words. In spite of her doubts about Medvedev, she nonetheless has described Putin's pronouncements in his Japanese interview and subsequent press encounters as a conscious public warning to Medvedev to slow down his reform agenda. She argued on Ekho Moskvyy that Putin is striking back, letting Medvedev know that he, Putin, in spite of approval ratings that have declined to the mid-60's,

is the leader of a strong political organization that can get him elected president, if he should desire it.

14. (C) Sergey Zverev, former deputy head of the presidential administration and Kremlin insider, told us May 13 that, while not devoting considerable time to the substance of the interview, he was struck by the political and bureaucratic boldness Putin demonstrated in (a) putting himself at the center of 2012 presidential decision-making and (b) while tipping his hat to Medvedev's constitutional responsibilities to guide foreign policy, nonetheless proceeding to pronounce on an array of critical issues, not the least of which was U.S.-Russian relations. Zverev argued that improving U.S.-Russian relations would require a huge commitment of time and energy from Medvedev that would largely go unappreciated by the Russian public.

15. (C) To date Medvedev has not commented on Putin's description of the 2012 presidential race. However, Medvedev's swipe at United Russia's reluctance to engage in public debates with representatives of other political parties is also being considered in the context of Putin's recent jabs. Medvedev's support for laws promoting these debates is seen as being aimed directly at Putin. Furthermore, Medvedev's criticism of the way in which state funds have been allocated to large private corporations -- with the idea that the president is displeased with the work of Finance Minister Kudrin -- is also being viewed as implicit criticism of Putin's government and of the Prime Minister himself.

Comment

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16. (C) Putin's comments have intensified speculation over the long-term health of the tandem, and are consistent with his penchant for keeping the Russian political elite off-balance and for preserving all political options.
RUBIN